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Is This Aligned with the Character of God?

AS CEO OF A LARGE TECHNOLOGY FIRM, Carl was riding the wave of the dot-com boom. Through his charisma and dogged determination, he had taken a fractured company left bankrupt by his predecessor and made it a powerhouse in the industry. It looked as if Carl had it all until one afternoon at a convention in Las Vegas he gave in to temptation. With his top management busy at meetings, Carl slipped away to the hotel lounge to relax. While there, he struck up a conversation with Sandy, a beautiful married woman. One thing led to another, and Carl and Sandy committed adultery. That was bad enough, but the story didn't end there.

Sandy attended the convention with her husband who served on the company's Board of Directors. When Carl found out who Sandy's husband was, he knew he needed to do something quickly. Although Carl felt he'd covered his tracks well by pretending to be ill when he left the bar and having Sandy follow several minutes later, he still feared a scandal. And what if Sandy was pregnant? Carl needed a plan.

He enticed Jack to meet Sandy in the hotel casino for drinks with the idea that husband and wife would win a few rounds in blackjack and then go back to their room to "celebrate," thus covering any evidence of his misdeeds. The scheme backfired when Jack wouldn't leave the table after winning a few rounds. He kept playing, and through the course of the night, lost all he had and then some.



Things weren't going Carl's way, so he decided to devise another course of action. While having drinks with Sandy the night before, Carl learned about Jack's severe allergy to peanuts. So when Jack and Sandy weren't looking, Carl bribed a waiter to slip a few peanuts into Jack's soda, "as a joke" he told the unsuspecting man. Unbeknownst to Carl, federal agents were monitoring a high-profile terrorist in the casino that night and caught Carl's dirty deed on video surveillance tape. With the tape, they were able to piece together the evidence that eventually led to Carl's conviction of first-degree murder.

Perhaps you've figured out this is a modern day retelling of the biblical story of King David and Bathsheba. (See 2 Sam. 11:2-27.) This seemingly ripped-from-today's-headlines story is actually thousands of years old. We love the stories of David, not only because the Bible tells us he was a man after God's own heart, but more precisely, because he was a *fallen man* after God's own heart. We identify with David. Although he loved God, he didn't always do what God would have had him do, and he paid dearly for it. So why use David as a model for knowing and doing the will of God? Sometimes it is easier to see what we should do when we see someone else who's done it wrong.

Three Reasons to Ask the Question

What should be an easy question to ask is easy to forget, yet many of our ill-chosen decisions could be avoided if the question were asked: *Is this aligned with the character of God?* It seems simple, and yet, if simply asking the question popularized by the WWJD bracelets, What Would Jesus Do? worked, there would be no need for this book. But because the question and the answers appear obvious, we tend to skip it. Perhaps there is something more basic—a reason we skip this first step



in determining if something is of God or not. Perhaps we're not fully aware of our own needs.

Using the story of King David and Bathsheba, let's look at three things to consider when we are confronted with a decision—perspective, balance, and boundaries.

1. Perspective

King David, like Carl, had achieved a lot, and we can only speculate he might have begun to believe his own press at this point. After all, David was not only crowned king of Judah but also over all of Israel. With his reign came peace, power, and prestige to a whole nation. I'm sure people were praising him, telling him how grateful they were for his leadership. It must have felt good to finally be *somebody* after being *nobody* for so long. King David was the same “young boy David” that everyone dismissed when he offered to slay the giant, Goliath, with a sling and stone. Now he was king, and a popular one at that. From the biblical narrative we don't know what David was thinking, but it is clear he used his power inappropriately. Is it possible he thought he *deserved* to have Bathsheba? He *was*, after all, the king, and because of *his* leadership the whole nation prospered.

Bonnie's Story

Let's look at a story a little closer to home. Bonnie works for the Public Works Department. Her job duties include traveling around inspecting the city's utilities. For this reason she has a company car. Bonnie is a hard worker, a loyal employee who often puts in extra hours. Lately, she's had a difficult time juggling the demands of her ill father, her job, and her role as a single mom.

The problem began innocently when she was called by her daughter's school nurse to come pick up Chloe. Bonnie was al-



ready out that day and figured it wouldn't be a problem to pick her sick child up in the city car. She also ran a few personal errands that week—the doctor's office, the pharmacy, and to the post office for her dad. Bonnie couldn't make up the hours she lost while running these errands because of her need to get home to take care of Chloe and her dad. *She had, after all, put in all those overtime hours before, she reasoned. Besides, no one will mind.*

One day, a neighbor called city hall complaining that his tax dollars were to be used “only for city business, and not for personal business, especially when cuts were being considered for public transportation.” Bonnie was furious. How dare they question her use of public resources! Didn't they know how hard she worked and how many weeks she'd gone above and beyond to serve the public good? “I think I've *earned* a little understanding,” she told a colleague.

Both David and Bonnie needed a different perspective to allow them to step out of their own entitlements. We often find our views clouded by beliefs that a certain action is entitled or due us. We *deserve* it or we have *earned* it are often used to justify an action we know to be wrong. Distance from our situations is what we need so we can see them clearly; and seeing them through God's eyes gives us that clear view—a God's eye view—and a better perspective.

2. Balance

Likewise, in the heat of the moment, when other issues cloud our good judgment, when we're tired, or when we're feeling low, we need balance in our thought processes. This is the second reason we should ask, *Is this aligned with the character of God?* We don't know why King David did not go into battle with his men but chose to stay home instead. He might

have been tired or lonely. He might have begun to doubt himself, or he was feeling low. We don't know. But what we do know is that David was acting out of character. He should have been leading the battle, but this day he wasn't, and he got into trouble.

Connie's Story

Connie was a schoolteacher with 28 years in the system—just two years to go until retirement. Yet Connie was getting tired. It became more of a struggle to go into work every day. Her patience with the students was wearing thin. Was she just getting old or were the students getting more and more disrespectful? On the weekends she always hung out with the girls, but lately all she wanted to do was sleep. Recently, while picking up some things at a local convenience store, Connie slipped a pack of chewing gum into her pocket before heading to the counter to pay for her slushy. Perhaps she was lonely, tired, or feeling low—Connie isn't sure which. As outrageous as it seems, when she walked out the front door, two policemen were there to greet her. Connie was fingerprinted and had a mug shot taken before she was released on bail. Now, she's suspended from school, and she's not sure how, or if, she'll ever be able to go back and face the kids again. Connie told a friend one day, *I don't know what happened to me, I've never even had a speeding ticket.*

When we're tired, depressed, and not ourselves for one reason or another, we need balance in our thinking. When we're in this state, our vision narrows, we don't consider all the consequences of our actions, and many times our decisions are not clearly thought through. When we ask ourselves if this choice is aligned with the character of God, it forces us to pause and question the outcome of our decisions. When we examine our



motives behind what we do, when we look at the consequences of our actions and compare them to the character of God, we gain proper balance.

3. Boundaries

The third reason to ask the question is, more often than not, we know right from wrong, but we can't bring ourselves to follow through. We need someone else to be the heavy—to tell us no. David knew the rules of God. He knew he shouldn't take another man's wife, but he chose to do it anyway.

We don't like to admit we know what we're about to do is wrong. That is why we need to ask ourselves, *Is this aligned with the character of God?* When we do, our attention is immediately drawn away from the temptation and placed on the Lord above all temptations.

Vanessa's Story

Vanessa had been working two part-time jobs and going to night school for three years. She couldn't have done it without the help of her friends in her study group. One week, Ron came to the study group with answers for the final exam, which he'd swiped from a professor's desk. Everyone in the group seemed to be okay with using these answers—everyone but Vanessa. She knew it was wrong but wondered, *Could God have provided these answers because He knows how hard I've been working?* Vanessa gave in to temptation. She wasn't caught, but now must live with the guilt of knowing she cheated. Additionally, she's lost her study group friends. She no longer hangs out with them because their very presence reminds her of what she did.

Vanessa needed boundaries or guidelines that didn't shift with each situation to help her make tough decisions. Like David, she knew her choice was wrong, but instead of having

the strength of her convictions, she convinced herself God must have had His hand in it. We need standards outside of ourselves to provide boundaries—a framework based upon the unchanging character of God from which we operate so we can tell the difference between what is true and what is a lie. Then, when provocations come, we can judge them for what they are—temptations outside of God’s will. We need boundaries.

Distorted Views

Perspective, balance, and boundaries are important to keep in mind as we seek to make necessary decisions. But if, for one reason or another, our views of God are *distorted*, we may be led in the wrong direction even if we ask the right question. As the saying goes, if the ladder is propped up against the wrong wall, climbing to the top won’t get us where we want to go.

There are many reasons one might have a distorted view of God. Did you suffer abuse as a child and the idea of God as a loving Father is difficult for you to comprehend? Were you reared in a strict household and the concept of a God who loves unconditionally is hard for you to imagine? Would it be a stretch for you to view God as compassionate? Another distorted view of God that affects most of us to some degree is caused by the pluralistic society we live in that tells us that just about any concept you may have of God is valid.

You may be wondering if I am going to claim to know God better than anyone else. I’ve even asked myself what in the world I think qualifies me to write about the God of the universe. I certainly don’t know all there is to know—or even a good portion of it—but I can tell you what I have found to be true in my life. In the end, you must decide for yourself who God is in your life.

As God’s character is revealed to us as Father, Guide, and



Friend, we can make important choices by measuring each decision as to whether or not it is aligned with His character.

Father

If you've spent time in Christian circles, you've heard God referred to as *Father*, but in our broken and splintered world, not all earthly fathers have been kind, loving, and compassionate. Many have grown up with dads who are drill sergeants, pushovers, or controlling and smothering. These human traits may limit us in the way we see God the Father.

So, given our human limitations, how do we describe God? There are more than 212 names for God in the Bible that attempt to do just that. For the Jewish nation, a name was more than just a way to address someone; it conferred upon that person the hopes, fears, and dreams of the parents. It foretold who that person would become. Names are significant to God. Throughout history, He often changed someone's name to better reflect the person's calling.

For instance, Jacob means "the one who grasps the heel, or the one who deceives." Can you imagine naming your child, "he who deceives?" Jacob lived up to his name. He grabbed the heel of his brother at birth and later deceived him out of his birthright. Fortunately, God had other plans for Jacob and turned the meaning of his name on end. Eventually, Jacob, instead of grabbing what was not his, grabbed onto God and wouldn't let go. Later in Jacob's life, God changed his name to Israel, meaning "he who struggles *with* God." This new name reflected Jacob's new character and the character of the nation he was to lead. Israel was now one who was sought and grabbed by God.

The name *Yahweh*, meaning the self-existent, ever-present one, is the Old Testament primary name given the Creator

God. He is the One who always has been and always will be present. In the Gospels, Jesus added another dimension to our understanding of God's character by calling Him *Father*. Jesus calls God *Father* 275 times. No longer is God simply "God the Father, our Creator," He is now referred to as *Our Father*.

You did not receive the spirit of bondage to fear, but you received the spirit of adoption by which we cry out, "Abba, Father" (*Rom. 8:15, NKJV*).

Abba is the name a Jewish or Arab child used for his or her daddy. This intimate and personal name for God is often combined with the word *Father* as in this verse in Romans.

This Father-child relationship is what Jesus was establishing when He taught us to pray to "Our Father." We do not address some distant, overbearing, rule-touting, or abusive father but our *Abba*, Daddy, who longs to protect us, hold us dearly, and love us unconditionally.

I have provided a list of many of the other names for God in Appendix B of this book.

Guide

God knows us through and through as no one else in our lives knows us. His guidance is always available through His Word, but He knows us well enough to know that we have a great capacity for going off on our own and making mistakes—even big mistakes. When we make a wrong choice, either unwittingly or deliberately, He can use that to help us learn who He is and who He wants us to be.

In this way, God is not only our Father but also our Guide. He knows how to take the difficult situations of our lives and teach us important lessons we must learn. He knows the spiritual growth that must take place within so that we can grow in-



to the relationship He longs to have with us. As He walks with us through tough times and good times, we learn to trust the Father of our inner spirit to guide us.

Friend

I was blessed to grow up in a Christian home where the name of Jesus was as familiar as my own name. It was during a time in the Christian church when the theological pendulum had swung away from viewing God as a taskmaster and toward seeing Him as a Friend. In Sunday School, we sang songs about Jesus as Friend, and when I spoke of my relationship with Him I used the language of friendship—buddy, pal, confidant, companion, soul mate.

Knowing God as my best Friend brought great comfort through my difficult teenage years. During tough times, I sat in the wooden pews in the tiny chapel at our church talking out loud to my Friend. He was always there for me, would never forsake me, and always understood me better than anyone else could.

It wasn't until much later that I realized how special that understanding of God was—and how rare. As I grew older, I learned to balance that familiarity with reverence and awe, but how I appreciate the gift of knowing Him as my best Friend.

In John 15, Jesus teaches His disciples about staying grafted to the vine of our Heavenly Father. He follows this important teaching with the command to love others as He has loved them, even to the point of being willing to lay down His life for them.

You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you (*vv. 15:14-15*).



With Jesus as our Lord and Savior, servanthood is our rightful place. Jews understood servants had no rights and rarely, if ever, knew their master's business. But Jesus tells us we are His friends, and as His friends we know the secrets only best friends tell one another. We know *everything*, He says. You must be thinking as I have: then why do I not know what decisions I should make, what choices are the right ones, and how to discern His will? Well, you are correct. We don't know. We don't know what we don't *need* to know. When we are in a right relationship with Jesus, when we know Him as intimately as a best Friend, then we know all we *need* to know to make wise decisions.

Best friends know each other's likes and dislikes and what things they'd approve. Don't you know things about your best friend such as favorite foods, favorite color, or how he or she likes to celebrate birthdays? I bet you also know his or her pet peeves, and what makes him or her feel angry or disappointed. Likewise, when we know Jesus as our best Friend, we make it a point to know what pleases and disappoints Him so that we can adjust our behavior accordingly. With this understanding, the following verse makes sense.

You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name (*John 15:16*).

We will bear the fruit of good decision-making when we are grafted to the Father and develop our relationship with Jesus as our best Friend.

What's in a Name?

What would my Father say? What would my Guide suggest? What would my best Friend think? When we're in an in-



timate relationship with Him, these become our first thoughts. You may be wondering what this looks like in reality. Let's look at the three women we met earlier to see how things might have been different if they had made choices using this filter.

Bonnie, the public works employee, needed perspective. She felt she deserved a little respect for the sacrifices she'd made. If Bonnie knew God as her *Abba* Father, she might not have needed recognition from others for her hard work. When we don't feel appreciated, understood, and loved, we are vulnerable to filling that void ourselves. Like Bonnie, I've felt misunderstood and underappreciated, and like her, I've done some things I knew to be wrong because I convinced myself I deserved better. Now when those kinds of feelings creep up within me, I recognize them as a signal I need to spend some alone time in the lap of my *Abba* in prayer. I need to feel His unconditional love. I need to have my acceptance tank filled by my Heavenly Father. Then, and only then, will I gain a proper perspective on my needs.

Connie was our tired and depressed schoolteacher who needed balance in her thinking so she could properly weigh the consequences of her actions. If Connie had turned to God as her Guide, then the first thing she might have remembered was that God is not a rigid schoolteacher with a red marker in hand, ready to point out every little mistake. Rather, she might have realized God was with her wherever she goes, in the classroom when students are whispering behind her back or in the convenience store when temptation comes. By turning to God as her constant Guide, Connie can gain the proper balance she needs. When we are tired, depressed, or feeling low, we need God's guidance to help us properly view our circumstances. Sometimes the voice of reason within us is enough to counter the negative messages from others or from Satan himself. Oth-



er times, we need to hear God's voice reminding us of His promises and encouraging us along the way. God's gentle voice is always there to guide us when we listen.

Vanessa was faced with worldly temptations. From the time of Adam and Eve, good Christian men and women have been led astray by the desire to have, be, and do what we cannot. At the root of our slide into temptation is our selfish pride. I hate to admit it, but sometimes I just don't want to look bad, I have trouble admitting my weaknesses, or I fear losing face in front of friends, so I fall for the tempter's snare. When we turn to Jesus, we not only have someone to be with us in the tough times but we also have someone who has faced temptation and overcome it. In facing down death itself, Jesus submitted His life to the will of His Father to be used as our sacrifice so that once and for all Satan's hold on us would be broken. All Satan has is lies; he has no other power. When we turn to Jesus, He will reveal the deceptions and give us His power to overcome Satan's snares. God knows Satan's playbook. He knows his every move, and as our best Friend, He will reveal what we need to know so our joy will be complete.

The Rest of the Story

We began this chapter by looking at the story of King David and Bathsheba through retelling it with a modern-day backdrop, and I said that it was good to look at someone who has done it wrong and suffered the consequences. This is certainly true with King David, for he suffered immensely for his bad choices. But there is much more to the story.

When we left the drama, King David had not only committed adultery, but he also had lied in order to cover it up. Then, on top of that, he hatched an elaborate scheme to further hide his misdeeds by orchestrating a murder after Bathsheba sent



word of her pregnancy. And David was a man whom God had chosen to be the leader for His people—an ancestor of the long-awaited Messiah. How is it that King David, an adulterer, murderer, and liar, is called “a man after God’s own heart”?

David took Bathsheba as his wife, and she bore him a son. On word from God, Nathan, the court’s resident prophet, shared with David a little story about a man who, although he owned a lot of sheep of his own, took another man’s sheep and served it up as if it were his. David, so blinded by his own sins, couldn’t recognize himself in the prophet’s story. When it was revealed that *he* was the man who had taken what belonged to another, the scriptures tell us that David bitterly mourned. And although David was truly sorry for what he had done and God forgave him of his sins, he still suffered the consequences of his behavior. Because David slept with Bathsheba and murdered Uriah, their firstborn son would die.

At this point, many of us would be mad at God. In fact, a lot of people reading this story in 2 Samuel have a hard time with God’s actions. As harsh as those actions might have seemed to David, they seem unusually cruel—even heartless—to us. David begged and pleaded for his son’s life, fasting and worshipping God, but to no avail. If I had been David, I might have turned away from God or become so bitter my heart would have hardened. But not David. After his son’s death, he got up and ate. When asked why he was so distraught while his son was alive and then seemed to be accepting after his death, David replied:

While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept. I thought, ‘Who knows? The LORD may be gracious to me and let the child live.’ But now that he is dead, why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I will go to him, but he will not return to me (2 Sam. 12:22-23).

This was King David's turning point. From this point forward, we see a changed person, one who seeks God with all his heart, who becomes so close to God that he knows God's character and adjusts his life accordingly. Although we later read of instances where David slips, we see what God sees—a man who forms and shapes himself after the very heart of God. We can only speculate as to what went through David's mind and what exactly triggered the change, but it is fair to say David was confronted with who he was and who God was. God had promised that David would be the one to prepare His people for the building of His temple, a temple that David's son would build. If God had just taken David's only son, either God was not a God of His word, or David would have another son. Would he trust God even though he didn't fully understand what God was doing? David had a tough choice, and he chose to trust God.

There have been many painful experiences in my own life when I've had difficult choices to make. The same is probably true for you. A full understanding of who God is and who He isn't has helped me trust Him. For when I've come to the end of my rope, when I have the choice to hang on to my hurt or let it go and trust the One who knows, then my choices become easier.

We Don't Know What We Don't Know

Psalms 51, which David wrote during the time of his son's death, and Ps. 32, his response to God's cleansing forgiveness, are two of my favorites to read when I'm faced with situations for which I can find no explanation. These and other psalms written by David demonstrate a depth of knowledge and an intimacy with his Father, his Abba, his Guide, and Friend that I wish to emulate. David didn't always understand what God was doing. How could he? God's purposes for David would not



be revealed until the birth of the Messiah. It was from the “root of Jesse,” David’s father, that the lineage of Jesus would be traced a thousand years later.

He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end (*Luke 1:32-33, KJV*).

David did not know he was a part of events that would change the world. He did not know his sins could have altered those plans forever had it not been for a sovereign and gracious God. Even though God knew the sins David would commit, He still chose him to be a part of His plan. Why? Why would God do such a thing? Because God is concerned with matters of the heart. This is the key to understanding God’s character, and it affects all other aspects of who He is and how He interacts with us. From understanding His discipline to comprehending His commands, seeing them through the lens of His concern for our hearts, the epicenter of our spiritual beings, lends new understanding.

Nowhere is God’s concern for our hearts revealed more clearly than through the gift of His Son. It is through the life of Jesus Christ that we see God’s character most perfectly, for through His great sacrifice we see this principle clearly. God could have sent His Son to die so we would never experience pain again, never experience tragedy or suffering. He could have died so we would never lose a loved one to cancer, witness the horrors of war, or see a child suffer. But He did not. God chose instead to send His Son to die and forever remove the barrier separating our hearts from His. He died so that now and forever we could have heart-to-heart communion with



Him. We cannot know all there is to know about God; but this we know, God loves us so. God saw in David a man after His own heart, not a perfect man. Nevertheless, he was a person who, in his successes and his failings, would become an example for us of what it means to ask the question: *Is this aligned with the character of God?*

This is not a question that can be answered with a simple yes or no. We are reminding ourselves to submit to the authority of the One who knows, who knows us better than we know ourselves, who knows what is best, and who knows it is not about what we do here and now but about *who we become* for now and for eternity

Is the decision you need to make today aligned with the character of God?